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ABSTRACT

This paper describes school improvement through clusters (or leagues) of the Colorado Department of Education. School improvement clusters are defined as associations of schools and cooperating organizations dedicated to improving the quality of education. Participants work together with a common goal or unifying concept. The paper describes 14 characteristics of effective cluster groups. Important points are: membership is limited to five to eight schools in close proximity to each other, and school participation is committed for at least 3 years. Principal and teacher-leader roles in the school cluster are important; eight specific responsibilities are outlined. Each school maintains an accountability committee and a school improvement management team. The superintendent plays a supportive role as a resource for the cluster groups. Each cluster has a "hub," a group of specialists from participating organizations that provides support services and leadership to the cluster members. The paper includes a diagram of the Colorado Educational Improvement Network. (MD)

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# The School Improvement Cluster

## A Concept Paper

Colorado Department of Education

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The School Improvement Cluster

## I. Definition

A school improvement cluster [1] is an association of individual schools and cooperating organizations dedicated to objectives:

1. Improving the quality of education in the cooperating schools,
2. Increasing the extent to which cooperating schools become self-renewing,
3. Increasing the extent to which research information is used in school improvement planning, and
4. Improving the quality of teacher and administrator training programs in the cooperating universities.

Participants in the cluster have identified a common goal or unifying concept related to improving the quality of education in the cooperating schools. Examples of unifying concepts:

- Using quality determinants as a basis for planning improvements,
- Using an 8-step process to improve the climate of a school,
- Using technology to improve achievement, and
- Improving quality through individually guided education (IGE)

A "hub" consisting of a department of education school improvement specialist, a representative of the dean of a cooperating university, and a BOCES - based facilitator, provides administrative services and resources to member schools.

A small steering committee, composed of the hub consultants, the BOCES facilitator, and a small group of principals and teacher-leaders, plans the activities of the cluster.

The cluster is seen as a continuing, long term support system. It is not a short-term, program-specific arrangement.

## II. Characteristics of an Effective School Improvement Cluster

1. The cluster's goal or unifying concept is recognized as an improvement priority at each participating school

2. Cluster membership is limited to from 5 to 8 schools so that maximum cohesiveness can be accomplished

3. Participating schools are located in close proximity to one another

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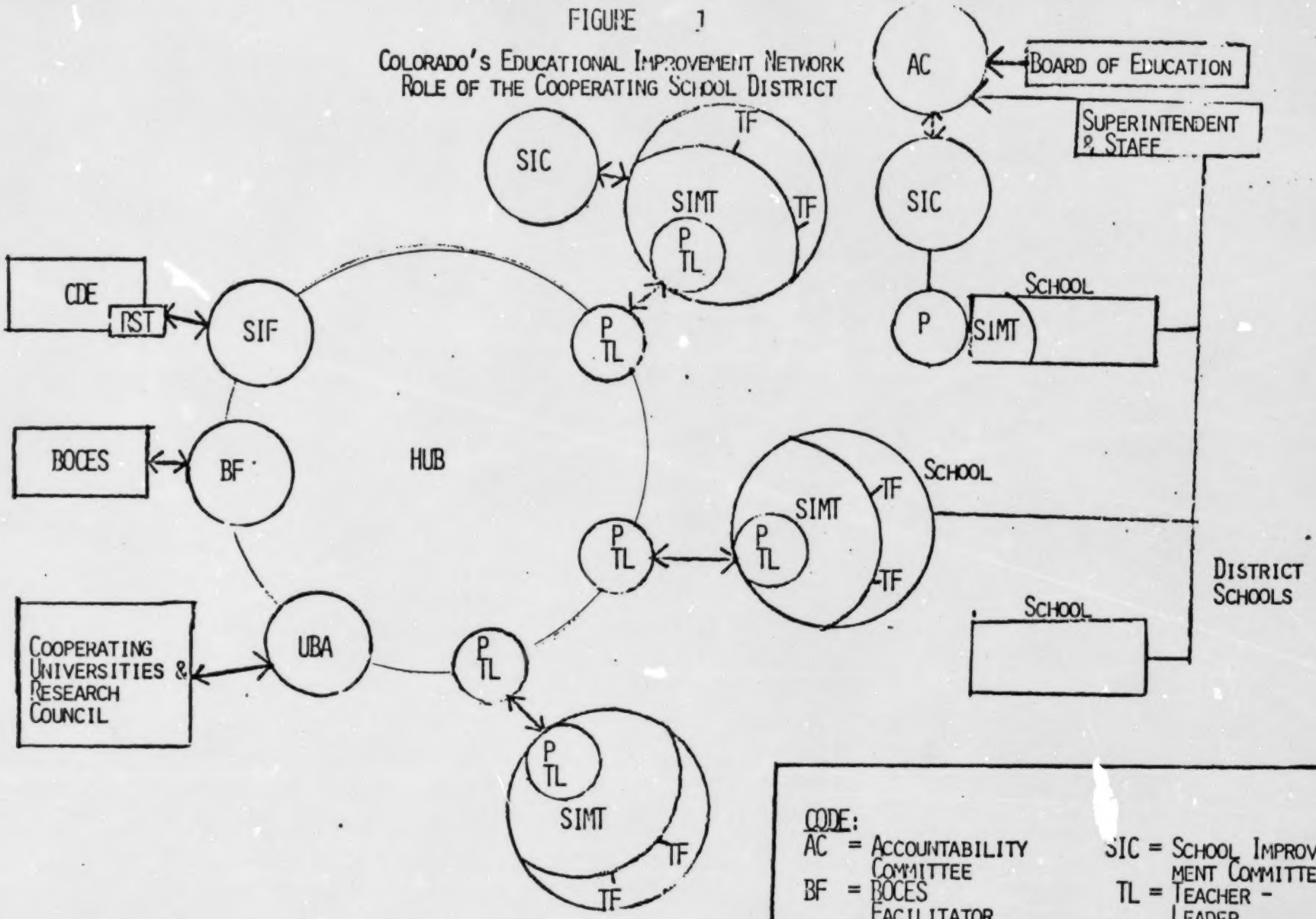
(1) Sometimes called a "league"

FIGURE 1

COLORADO'S EDUCATIONAL IMPROVEMENT NETWORK
ROLE OF THE COOPERATING SCHOOL DISTRICT




CODE:

AC = ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE
BF = BOCES FACILITATOR
P = PRINCIPAL
RST = REGIONAL SUPPORT TEAM
SIC = SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT COMMITTEE
TL = TEACHER - LEADER
UBA = UNIVERSITY - BASED ASSOCIATE
SIMT = SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT MANAGEMENT TEAM

4. There is an expressed intent on the part of the leaders of each participating school to continue cluster participation for at least three years.

5. Provision has been made, within each participating school, for substantial staff involvement in the improvement effort.

6. All participating schools launch school improvement projects related to the unifying concept.

7. Each school's participation in the cluster is supported by the district's superintendent and Board of Education.

8. The local district office provides resources to the school to support its involvement in systematic improvement.

9. Provision has been made in each district for maintaining understanding and support of the non-cluster schools for the activities of the cluster school.

10. Participating schools develop written school improvement action plans.

11. Improvement projects are justifiable by the research and are compatible with district school improvement policies.

12. Cluster meetings are efficiently managed and well planned to provide for:

    -Sharing of successes and problems
    -Learning new skills needed to organize and manage projects
    -Learning about the research and its implications for effective projects
    -Evaluation activities, and
    -Collegiality

13. The "hub" of support services includes: expertise re-managing the change process, expertise re the implications of research for the projects, and access to a materials bank and a talent bank.

14. Research information and information regarding the needs of cluster schools is communicated by the university based associate to leaders in the cooperating college of education. This information is used by college of education leaders in planning improvements in teacher- and administrator-training programs.

III. Role of the Principal and the Teacher-Leader Representing the School to the Cluster

Each principal, with superintendent approval, agrees:

1. To initiate, within one year of forming the league, at least one substantial school improvement project related to the overall thrust of the league,
2. To attend all league meetings ( usually 4-6 meetings per year) and to bring one teacher-leader to each meeting,
3. To develop a school improvement action plan which will include plan(s) for the league-related project,
4. To share successes and failures with other league members, and
5. To evaluate, with assistance from hub facilitators, and CDE, the impact of the individual school improvement activities on achievement and satisfaction.

Each principal, and teacher-leader will also:

1. Learn, from the university-based associate and others, about findings of research regarding quality education and about school improvement processes.
2. Use this information in assisting the school improvement committee as it develops action plans for school improvement.
3. Share with others in the cluster information regarding successful and unsuccessful practices in their efforts to improve the school.
4. Participate, with other members of the cluster, in leadership training activities to develop skills seen as important by the group.

IV. The Role of the Individual School's Accountability Committee* (School Improvement Committee)

1. In cooperation with the principal, assists with the conduct of needs and strengths assessments related to possible school improvement priorities

2. Interprets the school's program evaluation information

3. Makes recommendations to the principal and the school improvement committee re priorities for improvement

4. In cooperation with the principal, communicates to parents, other community members, students, staff, and the district accountability committee re the school's priorities, action plan, and the outcomes of its projects

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* This role will vary from school to school, depending on local circumstances.

V. The Role of the Superintendent's Office re the Cluster

1. Approve the individual school's participation in the school improvement cluster

2. Plan and organize in-district activities to generate understanding and support from school leaders for the efforts of the cluster school

3. Assist principals in developing school improvement plans related to district-wide and individual school priorities. Approve such plans once they are developed

4. Serve as a resource person to the BOCES director and the school improvement specialist from CDE in developing plans for the cluster and in evaluating the cluster's effectiveness

4. Organize and manage district-wide staff development activities related to district-wide priorities and provide support for school-based staff development activities related to approved school-based action plans.

6. Report progressof the district towards achieving its improvement goals to:

   - the board of education
   - the general public
   - parents, staff members, and students

VI. The Role of the School Improvement Management Team

The School Improvement Management Team is the group within the school which assists the principal in managing the improvement process. Its role includes:

1. Assisting the principal in developing and managing the school's improvement plan, including:
   - Assisting each task force in developing an action plan which is responsive to staff recommendations
   - Allocating responsibility for tasks to be accomplished, setting target dates and hearing progress reports
   - Suggesting and approving modifications of the task force action plans as tasks are accomplishing
   - Recommending professional growth activities for task force members
2. Assuming responsibility for planning and conducting the school's staff development program
3. Collects base-line and bench-mark data so that the schools progress towards its improvement goals can be documented.

VII. Roles of the Hub Leadership Team

1. The School Improvement Process Specialist

- Provides technical assistance to cluster schools re planning processes, managing school improvement plans, organizing and supporting school improvement task forces, evaluation, and reporting outcomes
- Recommends approval or disapproval from CDE re funding of school improvement mini-grants initiated by the cluster schools and recommended by participating superintendents
- Works with the field coodinator and the CDE regional service team to broker technical assistance available for CDE staff and from CDE's talent bank
- Provides CDE with evaluative information regarding the effectiveness of the schools' projects in improving students' achievement and satisfaction
- Provides CDE with detailed information re school improvement priorities as these priorities are identified in participating schools and districts
- Works with the CDE field coordinator to assist the BOCES Facilitator in organizing regional professional growth activities (workshops and conferences) related to priorities of participating districts and schools.
- Assumes over-all leadership responsibility for the effectiveness of the cluster

2. Roles of the University-Based Associate

- At each cluster meeting, provides cluster members with information from the research which can be used to guide the planning and professional development efforts of participating schools.
- Assists the CDE school improvement process specialist and the BOCES Facilitator in managing the cluster by providing them with information regarding effective management of school improvement
- Communicates information from the cluster to the Colorado Research Council and to the associate's university regarding the information needs of cluster participants.
- Communicates to the university information from the cluster regarding the implications of cluster activities for teacher and administrator preparation and training.
- Provides leadership to task forces working within the college of education so that program improvements will reflect promising and successful practice as defined in the research and will reflect the needs of participating schools
- Encourages the assignment of practice teachers to work in the participating schools and graduate students to serve internships and conduct studies
- When appropriate, arranges for or provide university credit for well-planned and well-evaluated professional growth and school improvement activities

- Organizes and manages an exchange program which would provide master teachers and administrators with an opportunity to serve as university faculty members (adjunct professors) and would provide university faculty members with an opportunity to participate directly in the improvement projects.

3. Roles of the BOCES Facilitator re Cluster Management

- To involve area superintendents in the identification of the unifying concepts (priorities) around which clusters will be formed
- To present to area superintendents, for approval or modification, an annual plan for organizing and managing cluster activities
- To provide the superintendents with progress reports and evaluative information regarding cluster activities
- To provide leadership to the cluster steering committee. This committee will develop specific agendas for each cluster meeting and will plan regional workshops and conferences related to cluster members' needs. It will also plan regional dissemination conferences so that information regarding promising and successful practices can be made available to non-cluster schools
- To develop and submit to CDE mini-grant proposals for activities related to providing services to cluster participants
- To request technical assistance for non-member as well as member schools from CDE's talent bank and from the cooperating university's faculty